

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL EDWARD CARDON,
U.S. ARMY, DEPUTY COMMANDING GENERAL FOR SUPPORT, MULTINATIONAL DIVISION-CENTER
AND TASK FORCE MARNE, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ SUBJECT: OPERATION MARNE
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LIEUTENANT COMMANDER BROOK DEWALT, USN (Office of the Secretary of
Defense for Public Affairs): Hello. I like to welcome you all to the
Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable for Thursday, January 24th, 2007
(sic). My name is Lieutenant Commander Brook DeWalt with the Office of the
Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating our call today.

A note to our bloggers on the line today: please remember to clearly
state your name and blog or organization in advance of your question, and please
respect our guest's time, keeping questions succinct and to the point.

Today our guest from Iraq is U.S. Army Brigadier General Edward Cardon,
deputy commanding general for Support of Multinational Division
Multinational Division-Center and Task Force Marne. General Cardon is here
today to provide an operational update, including Operation -- (audio break) --
Fortitude II.

We're pleased to have you as a guest today, sir.

GEN. CARDON: Well, thank you very much.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: And do you have any opening statements you'd like to
begin with?

GEN. CARDON: Well, I'll just say that we continue to push in the
southern area of Baghdad. Some of you probably saw on the news that we've had --
-- you know, the big airstrikes make news -- on the 10th of January and the 20th
of January. But what you don't hear so much about is the ground action going
out there as well, as we build a new patrol base. This will allow us to
actually kind of get this last bit of this area away from al Qaeda in southern
Baghdad.

And what's significant about this is, when I was here before, in 2005,
this was the area that, you know, rockets used to come out of toward the center
of Baghdad. So now we're all the way down, almost on par with Salman Pak, and
we're going to consolidate our gains and keep working on the governance and
economic development.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: Fantastic, sir. And if we can go right into our blogger Q&A, if we can go ahead and begin with Eric Hamilton.

Q Okay. Thank you. Thank you, General Cardon. This is Eric Hamilton from the Institute for the Study of War. Previously al Qaeda was using this area south of Baghdad with routes from Arab Jabour and Hawr Rajab to funnel accelerants into Baghdad. And I sort of have a two-part question here. First, do you have a sense for how many AQI fighters are left in the area? And are there still others trickling in? And if so, where are they coming from?

GEN. CARDON: There's still some fighters down there. I think the numbers are quite low.

However, the difference now is, we've simply been here. We built a number of patrol bases down there.

I think the difference now is before we were reacting to al Qaeda, and now they react to us. I think we've had steady, constant pressure on them, and what helps us, especially in this area, is we have a pretty robust concerned citizen movement that started in this area, which is helping us not only clear but to hold this ground permanently. And of course the next part of that is the economic development and the government piece of that.

But I think that for the most part, we've taken this away from al Qaeda as a way to funnel accelerants into Baghdad. Q Okay. Thank you, sir.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: Great.

And next we can go to Chuck Simmins.

Q Good afternoon, General. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. I wanted to ask you about infrastructure. And it's kind of a two-part question as well. The first part would be, with our work on infrastructure, how much of it are we repairing battle damage? How much of it are we repairing neglect for the last 14 years? And how much of it is brand-new; they never had it before?

And the second part of my question goes to services that we in the United States take for granted, like postal service, telephone and local electric service. I know we're working on the big infrastructure. Are we working on the small infrastructure as well?

GEN. CARDON: Yes. In fact, I would say over my tours here the big difference this time is the -- most Iraqis have adapted to the infrastructure shortfall that they have. In other words, when you fly over Baghdad at night, a lot of it's lit up. The question you have to ask yourself: Is that because the power is on, or is that because now there's hundreds of little generators, you know, providing electricity for those neighborhoods?

And there are areas which tend to be more rural -- you know, they're -- the Iraqis have figured out how to overcome their electricity problems. We tend to get a lot more questions on what can we do to help with the water. And the reason for that is -- of course is, you know, a lot of the water here relies on large pumping stations to pump large amounts of water in these canals. And so if those pumping stations aren't working, then, you know, they have some severe water issues.

However, we've had -- just recently, Tigris River opened up one of the biggest pumping stations they've had. I think the statistic is there's 28 times more water flowing in the Madain Qada now than there was when we arrived. That's what the brigade commander, Wayne Grigsby, told me the other day. And you can clearly see that when you go over there because it's a lot of water flowing in these canals. Now, there's still a lot of issues with the quality of the water, and that's still a problem.

And in terms of schools, you know, as I go out I don't get questions so much anymore. You know, if I went up here even 10 months ago when we first arrived, the number one thing that Iraqis would talk about is, you know, we need better security here, we need this. Now it's we need a school to educate our kids. That's the way of the future. And they're not asking for the school like we would expect in the States with, you know, climate control and all that. They just want a place that's good enough. They'll take what -- if you give them that, don't get me wrong. But I think they're much more realistic in their expectations.

I also think that the Iraqi government's finally starting to step up in some of these areas and provide some help, you know. For example, in the larger infrastructure in our area, when there was troubles on the Musayyib/Baghdad -- you know, main power line coming from the Musayyib power plant, they fixed all that themselves. They had Iraqi security and they had Iraqi companies that fixed it.

So you're starting to see more capacity in the government. But it's not anywhere near at the speed, efficiency that we're used to in the United States.

As for your earlier part about the delta, I don't know if I can really describe that very well because it really depends on where you are. If you go down to a place like Najaf, Karbala, I mean, I am amazed at the -- it's an economic boom down there. I mean, it is unbelievable what's going on down there.

You know, they just had 2 million pilgrims come into Karbala for Ashura. They were able to handle all that security on their own. And think about how much money that brought into the city. You know, the -- I talked to the governor and the chief of police the other day, they were very happy. And now, you know, they're working toward Arba'in, which is 40 days after, and they expect up to 8 million visitors. And they're just -- you know, they have an opposite problem now. Before they were worried about providing, you know, security. It wasn't that hard because not many people go because they thought the security's bad. But when I went up on the Iran-Iraq border, on the Zurbatiyah border crossing, there's a lot of Iranians. I asked them what they were coming to Iraq for. They said security's much better, we're going to Ashura in Karbala. By the way, I was amazed at how many of them speak English. But the -- you know, if there's millions and millions of people that are coming to Karbala, you know, it's almost like they're a victim of their own success.

But now if you go into areas like Arab Jabour, the infrastructure is terrible. You know, it's been fought over for a long time, and that's an area we're putting a lot of energy in.

I hope that answers your question.

Q Yes. Thank you.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: Great, thank you.

Next, if we can go to Richard Fernandez?

Q Good afternoon, General. This is Richard Fernandez of The Belmont Club.

I'd just like to take off from your earlier remark about the pilgrims and ask you if you have any anecdotal recollections of whether the Iranian pilgrims are impressed -- favorably impressed by what they're finding in Iraq, and whether that might not -- they might bring that impression back with them to Iran?

GEN. CARDON: Yeah, I -- well, first I asked them -- when I was up there, I asked them, you know, what do they hear about conditions in Iraq? And they said, it's much better, that's why we're going to Ashura. "Have you been there before?" "Nope, never been to Ashura before, but we hear it's safe, and so we're going." And he had his wife and his kids with him. And so, I mean, you look at that, that's pretty encouraging.

Now, it is southern part of Iraq, you know, and al Qaeda's given us a pretty good fight up in the northern part of Iraq. But in the southern part of Iraq, you know, it really seems to be coming along quite good. A lot of these people were part of a tour group. We also asked them if the tour guide was any good and he laughed. (Laughs.)

So the -- and also, I think the Iraqis have become much better at managing their entry into Iraq. Before, when we first showed up, it was pretty wide open, and now it's pretty controlled. They know who comes in. You know, it's like coming through a -- it's controlled, so they have a good handle on whose coming in and out of the country.

The -- I will say one thing that's interesting up there, though, is that the number of fuel trucks that came through there used to be about 10 a day, and now it's about 110 a day coming -- processed fuel coming from Iran. When we talked to the truck drivers, the truck drivers said they're taking crude in through Basra, it gets refined in Iran, and then they bring it back around and sell it into Iraq. And they -- you know, we asked them where they sell it; it's all over. So there's a pretty good little business going on there in their refineries, but it is interesting to us that the number of trucks seems to have, you know, multiplied a lot just over the last -- you know, that's a tenfold increase in the last three months.

That's interesting.

Q Thank you.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Thank you.

Next if we can go to Richard Lowry, please.

Q Hello. This is Richard Lowry from op-for.com. The talk that we hear back in the United States is about reconciliation at the national level. Are you seeing any more cooperation between the national government and the local and regional leaders in the southern belts of Baghdad?

GEN. CARDON: Some. It's slower than we would like, much slower. I think -- you know, I deal with the governors on a fairly regular basis, all five of them, and deal with a lot of local governance. What I think's happening out there is you're having a lot of growth at the local government level; they call it the nahiyas and the qadhas and then the province. And those appear to be getting more and more organized at the lower level. I think that organization is starting to put a lot of pressure from the bottom up on the national government.

Now, it's not perfect yet and there's still a lot of troubles with the ministry in the way they administer their services, you know. And certain ones, it certainly appears to be quite partisan, but sometimes you wonder is it really partisan or they've just been doing it that way for three years and they don't know any better.

And so part of our effort now is to bring the ministers down into the provinces. It's not so much of a problem in Karbala and Najaf because those governors have become pretty effective at learning how to pull that out. But in a place like southern Baghdad, the Mahmudiyah qadha, the Madain qadha, where you're -- you know, they're the outskirts of Baghdad, whereas, you know, a lot of the emphasis in Baghdad is on the nine districts as opposed to the outlying qadhas. So there's a little bit of a -- you know, it's the central city versus the outlying suburbs, so there's a little bit of a mis-distribution, I would say, of goods and services.

But I think that's really starting to improve. We have a new -- I guess you'd call him a mayor, for a lack of a better term, in the Mahmudiyah qadha, and he's already shown some good promise in the way that he is trying to pull together all of the local governments and the way that he's linking back to the Babil -- or to the Baghdad provincial government. He's only been there about a month. I've met with him twice. It looks pretty promising. That's a lot different than it was just even, you know, even three months ago. So I'm encouraged --

Q So you think that the solution's going to be from the ground up, then.

GEN. CARDON: Oh, yeah, I think, well, and also what's been putting pressure on this is, you know, a lot of people think that provincial elections -- the national government is a little bit concerned about this, because of the way they ran it, with the list system. But I think what's happening, when they're getting organized at the ground up, is it's starting to generate, you know, ground-up political power. And now when you start having an election, all the sudden rather than it being dictated from the national government, centralized national government, like they're used to, I think a lot of these provinces, qadhas, nahiyas, districts are starting to become pretty organized on their own, and they know who is delivering and who is not delivering. And that's a big change over the last few months.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Great, thanks.

And next if we could go to Jarred Fishman.

Q Yes, sir, thank you for your time. This is Lieutenant Fishman with the Air Force Pundit.

Could you talk a little bit about, to the atmosphere that you see every day as you're traveling around through the nahiyas, through the qadhas? We know the security situation has improved vastly. But especially since you go down and you see Karbala and possibly Najaf and the Shi'a areas, is there a sense that the Shi'a and the Sunni work together to build one Iraq? Or is there a sense that still Sistani will have his following, and then Sadr will have his following, and the Iranians will have their following, as it kind of was a few years ago? Is there a sense of a national Iraqi identity? Or is there the sense that we're basically just keeping the lid on things, as people try to have their own power bases?

GEN. CARDON: Yeah, let me answer that two ways.

First, when people say reconciliation, I often describe it as that there's really two. There's a Sunni-Shi'a reconciliation. That appears to be moving along quite, quite good in our area.

And then there's, what I call it, it's the reconciliation between the Shi'a parties. This is between ISCI; this is between OMS. And you know, the political power of the Shi'a which -- unfortunately most of those political parties had a armed wing and, you know, fought each other on a periodic basis. Now, let me go back to Karbala. And I don't know if this happened when I last talked to you, but we have -- I've taken the Karbala governor twice out to see the Anbar governor. I also took out 40 sheikhs from Karbala to Anbar. Some Anbar sheikhs have come to Karbala. To me, it looks like a pretty good reconciliation effort, and the coordination between Anbar province and Karbala province has really improved.

When I saw the governor here just a couple days ago, I've asked him, you know, if he's talked to -- (name inaudible). He says, well, I've been pretty busy here with our shura, but we're going to make some contact here and continue our dialogue, as we go forward and prepare for our next Arba'een commemoration. So the -- you know, from that, I see that as pretty positive.

The -- as far as Sistani and -- you know, he pretty much stays in the background, and Muqtada al-Sadr has also stayed in the background. But you know, I give a lot of credit to Muqtada al-Sadr for his ceasefire and the impact that has had in our area.

If you measure the statistics, it's without question that the attacks that we attribute to Shi'a extremists have dropped precipitously. And that's for a variety of reasons, but one of the reasons is Muqtada al-Sadr's ceasefire, and I think that's held ever since the 27th/28th of August, and that's been very encouraging.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: Thank you, sir.

And do we have -- do we have any other bloggers on the line that we have not said hello to? Okay, that said, do any of you have any additional follow-on questions?

Q Yeah, I'd like to ask a question, if I could, sir. This is Eric Hamilton again from the Institute for the Study of War.

There's been a lot of reporting about attacks by AQI on CLCs throughout Iraq, and I'm wondering if you can describe what impact that's had on your area in terms of how the CLCs operate, and also if you could comment on the

integration process of moving concerned local citizens into the Iraqi security forces.

GEN. CARDON: On part two, that's my life now -- not just Iraqi security forces, but just in general how to move them from concerned citizens into some aspect of Iraqi society.

But first let me to go al Qaeda and attacking the concerned citizen groups. Generally, when we set up a patrol base and we form the concerned citizen groups when -- (inaudible) -- they normally will get attacked. We tell them this up front. Some are well prepared and are able to defeat the attack. Sometimes over the last few months we've had a few killed. However, what's interesting, when this happens, is the resolve of these concerned local citizens actually goes up, and then we even have more of an effort by these locals to join these efforts and purge their areas of al Qaeda. And I think one of the reasons for that is, you know, a lot of these concerned citizens in our areas are formed around tribal lines. And so, you know, you have attacked a member of the tribe, and so, you know, it plays a little bit back into their Arab culture.

Now, with the concerned citizens, right now we have roughly 40,500 of them. We think about -- only about 20 percent of those are going to go into the Iraqi security forces, for a variety of reasons.

But the primary reason meaning that Iraq has decided they don't need 30,000 more policemen, army, et cetera out of that area. I mean, maybe across Iraq, they might need 30,000. We are having growths in our area of Iraqi army battalions over the next six months.

But back to concerned citizens, if you assume about 20 percent will go into the police or the army, what to do with the other 80 percent? And there's a variety of programs starting to come online, everything from adult education, vocational training, USAID programs and now Iraqis are starting to, you know, create their own little service industries through microgrants, microloans and, you know, we have to use -- (audio break) -- concerned citizen roles, one concerned citizen at a time.

And I talked to, you know, General Lynch tonight on that, and we had, you know, a whole hour talking about how fast can we move them, and I don't think it would be as fast as people would like, but we're going to move it as fast as we can as long as it's sustainable. And we don't want to just do one of these programs where we pay people, and then, you know, nine months from now you're unemployed and vulnerable to rejoining some sort of a group that you shouldn't be part of.

Q Yeah, so is there any sense that if the integration process doesn't go forward smoothly, that a lot of these individuals will revert back to insurgency?

GEN. CARDON: Well, that's where they came from. I mean, I don't -- I clearly think that a fair percentage of these concerned local citizens, if not part of the insurgency, at least supported it. And, you know, you can't reconcile with your friends, so I understand that part. But, you know, most of -- what's interesting is is once these groups form, normally the first thing they ask for is they want legitimacy with the Iraq government. That's the first thing they ask for.

And it's interesting that governance -- this whole function of governance is the first thing that comes up. Normally they form themselves into some sort of local council that we then try and link to the government, but that is a slow process because, you know, there's a lot of fear by some in the Iraqi national government about, you know, you're just another Sunni militia. But, you know, when you bring them out -- we bring the national government out to talk to them, then they kind of see what the issues are. But they -- as a lot of things in Iraq, it moves a lot slower than we would like. LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Okay, thank you, sir.

Do we have any other -- any of the other bloggers online with any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. Last year, I think it was, and then just a month or so ago, there were incidents in the south involving offshoot sects from the Shi'a. And the most recent one, the Iraqis handled themselves. Do you have any sense as to when these little oddball parties are going to be eliminated? It obviously does present a local threat, and it makes for big headlines here in the States.

GEN. CARDON: Yeah. This is the Sons of Heaven group?

Q Yeah.

GEN. CARDON: Last year. Boy, this is really an interesting group. They're almost like an apocalyptic cult. What's interesting is, is the governors told me that they completely underestimated this threat last year; that they thought all their threat would be from al Qaeda and didn't realize that it could be from within.

This year they recognized early on that they perhaps would have not only threats from Sunni extremists but threats from Shi'a extremists, and not necessarily -- you know, a lot of people lump Shi'a extremists with Jaish al-Mahdi special groups. They are much more nuanced than that, you know, the governors.

So when this attack started in Basra and Nasiriyah, the governor of Najaf called me up right away and says, "Hey, this is what's going on; this is where I need help." I said, "Well, Governor, you have lots of security forces down there." I said, "Have you talked to the teams down there?" He goes, "Yes. I just want to know if you're here to help us if we get in trouble." I said, "We're here to help you. You know, I've told you that."

And they were able to handle all this on their own, and we just maintained our liaison with them and watched this very, very carefully. But it was interesting that the minute it started, he was on the phone, you know, making sure that, hey, we knew about it and that if he needed help, that we would be there to help him.

And you know, I think that's very, very encouraging.

The Iraqis this time on Ashura, you know, they planned all the security themselves. They have really, you know, strengthened the area around the -- around the shrines. I think they're much more deliberate in the way they search people, in the way they profile, in the way they handle the traffic. It's -- you know, it's pretty impressive considering where they were just a year ago where they are today. And you know, like I said, as they said, you know, that

was -- the last one was 2 million; this next one's going to be 8 million. And you know, they said it's normally at least two or three times bigger, and they expect because it was so successful they're going to get a lot of visitors not just from within Iraq, but internationally from, you know, Pakistan and India and Iran and Bahrain and the other Gulf States.

Q Thank you.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: Great, thank you.

And there may be time for one more if there's any other questions out there.

Q I have one more follow-up. Lieutenant Fishman.

Sir, could you talk a little bit about -- to the increasing responsibility and professionalism of the Iraqi defense forces that you work with? Have you seen any change in the last few weeks and months as far as their abilities and what's your just overall feeling?

GEN. CARDON: Yeah, my -- you know, we have three types of Iraqi security forces in our area.

The Iraqi army I continue to be impressed with. Their fighting ability and the, you know, fighting spirit of them is quite good. They continue to suffer from logistics, but their ability to plan, organize, provide security, that is really -- for this fight they have is really quite good.

The police is still a problem. However, I am encouraged by the police chiefs that we have now appear to be much stronger than before. And you know, while it will take some time to root out some of the corruption and bad apples that they have, at least at the top, it appears that we're making some progress. And you know we're making progress when I think almost every one of them in our area has had at least one assassination attempt against his life, and they actually killed General Qais on the 9th of December, which is a real blow for Babil province. But the new police chief has already stepped up, and it looks like he's going to continue to build on what General Qais did.

The national police, you know, are (forming ?) police commandos. You know, one of them went through a rebuilding process. They're quite good, doing well. The other one has not yet been through that process, not doing so well. You know, some would say that they are the problem.

But that said, we work with them. And I think the jury's still out on what to do with the national police.

So when you put all those together, you know, the army is clearly capable in our area, with the 8th Iraqi Division and the one brigade from the 6th Iraqi Division, very capable commanders and capable units. And they're growing five more battalions in the 8th Division over the next six months. So we're pretty encouraged.

Q Great. Thank you.

GEN. CARDON: I should say one thing that we're also trying to do. We just opened up a noncommissioned officer academy that's open to police -- national police and the army. We've got about 50 students in there now. That's

our test pilot class. And we're going to grow this as an attempt to, you know, strengthen the middle leadership of the security forces. And we think that, you know, this has huge potential for pay-off. So, you know, we continue to assist them as we transition security in these areas.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: General, thank you very much. This has been some great Q&A today.

Do you have any final comments you'd like to add before we conclude?

GEN. CARDON: I'll just say that, you know, we're 10 months into a 15-month tour. I heard something interesting yesterday that said it's not 12 plus three -- you know, 12 months -- there's a big difference between 12 and 15 months. But I'll say, that said, we will make our reenlistment numbers for the division by 1 April. And when you consider that, that is an absolutely magnificent, you know, statistic, perhaps, that you could use to kind of measure the value that our soldiers place on the mission that they're conducting. So I'd just like to close with that.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Great. Thank you very much, General Cardon.

Today's program will be available online at the Bloggers link on dod.mil, where you are able to access a story based on today's call, along with source documents such as the general's bio, the audio file and transcripts of today's call. If there are any questions about the program, please contact DOD New Media at 703-325-0103. Again, thank you very much, General Cardon. We really appreciate your -- (inaudible). And thank you to all the blogger participants, as well.

This does conclude today's event. Please feel free to disconnect at any time.

General, thanks again so much. We do appreciate it.

GEN. CARDON: Thank you. Have a good evening.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: You too, sir. Take care.

Q Thank you, General.

END.